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## Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan

The exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan*, on view at the Elvehjem Museum of Art from September 4 through November 7, 2004, gives viewers the opportunity to consider the relationships between Wright's architectural vocation and his art-collecting avocation. Featured are images of Wright's own work in Japan, such as the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and other projects, from the Wisconsin Historical Society and around 30 of the 2200 Japanese prints he collected in Japan that are now in the Elvehjem's collection. Together these illustrate some contact points between Wright's work and the arts of Japan. The exhibition will have texts that describe Wright's complex relationship to the connoisseurship of Japanese prints in America.

Most people are familiar with Wright the architect but fewer know Wright the connoisseur and dealer of Japanese prints. Nevertheless, throughout his career he was intrigued by the Japanese print, and in the first decades of the 20th century he was pivotal in establishing some of the most important collections of Japanese prints in the United States.

In his essay "The Japanese Print: An Interpretation," Frank Lloyd Wright wrote "A Japanese artist's power of geometrical analysis seems little short of miraculous ... For the architect, particularly, it [the Japanese print] is a quickening inspiration." As an architect who worked in Japan and as an importer responsible for bringing thousands of Japanese prints to American collections, Wright was in a unique position to appreciate the beauties of these prints and their relationship to architecture.

Wright's designs sometimes seem indebted to Japanese ideas. He himself said that what he most admired about Japanese prints was their elimination of the inessential. In Wright's spare designs for his buildings, with their avoidance of florid decoration, we may see his own elimination of the inessential. Wright sometimes donated Japanese prints to be hung in the buildings he designed, such as those that still hang in the hall of the First Unitarian Church in Madison. In addition, Wright showed prints at Taliesin and designed a vault to keep them in with his other treasures.

### WRIGHT AND PRINT COLLECTING

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in Richland Center, Wisconsin in 1867. From 1878 to 1887, Wright lived with his family in Madison and in 1886 attended the University of Wisconsin as a special student for two terms. From 1887 to 1893 he worked in Chicago for architects J. Lyman Silsbee and Louis Sullivan. From the time of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 with its Japanese display, Wright was influenced in some ways by Japanese art. Wright reported that he found Japanese art "nearer to the earth ... than any European civilization alive or dead."

Wright was in Japan February and March 1905, collecting prints. By 1907 he had collected enough Japanese prints that he could mount an exhibition from his collection at the Art Institute of Chicago. Between 1913 and 1922 he returned to Japan to oversee work on his design for the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and look for Japanese prints to bring back to the U.S. Between 1914 and 1921 Wright designed 12 buildings for Japan. Of these, six were built; two remain whole and one is found in parts.

In 1915 and 1916 he was a purchasing agent in Japan for William Spaulding, by his own account spending "About one hundred and twenty five thousand Spaulding dollars for about a million dollars worth of prints." This Spaulding collection is now at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In addition to those prints Wright brought for Spaulding, he acquired several thousand prints to set himself up as a dealer. However, as Wright's financial problems increased in the late 1920s, he put up 5,100 Japanese prints as collateral for a loan from a Wisconsin bank. In 1928, the bank sold the collection to E. B. Van Vleck, professor of mathematics at the University of Wisconsin, for a total of \$4,000. Van Vleck eventually sold 2,164 of these Wright-selected prints to recoup his investments; the rest, along with all of his print collection went to his son John Hasbrouck, who in the 1980s donated nearly 4,000 of them to the Elvehjem.

The Elvehjem Museum of Art is open Tuesdays-Fridays 9-5 pm; Saturdays and Sundays 11-5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the Murray Street (north) entrance. Parking is available at the city of Madison's Lake Street and Frances Street ramps, University Lot 46 on Lake Street between Johnson and University Avenue, University Lot 47 on Johnson Street between Park and Lake streets. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Elvehjem Museum of Art will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, 608-263-4421 (voice).

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"Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan." Elvehjem Museum of Art (Wayback Machine). Archived on December 12, 2004.

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